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Xin Xi Guxiang: A Study of Regional Associations as a Bonding Mechanism in the Chinese Diaspora. The Hong Kong Experience

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The Chinese migrant's strong sense of attachment to the *guxiang* (native place) is well recognized, and literature on overseas Chinese generally proceeds on this assumption.¹ There is, however, little discussion on the mechanisms which have bonded the migrant to the native place, either by helping him express his longing and concern for it, or by reminding him of his obligations as a native son. Family ties, ownership of land and business connections as well as pure sentimental attachment, so poignant in centuries of Chinese poetry, naturally make migrants feel concerned for its well-being and eager for its news. Overseas Chinese in most cases continue to communicate with the native place on an individual basis, for there are levels of activities where the scale and complexity are such that only organizational efforts would suffice. At the same time, an easily identifiable institution enables those at home to contact and rally more effectively its migrant fellow-regionals, when the need for spiritual or material help arises.

Dou Jiliang states that native place consciousness is the spiritual power supporting the formation of regional institutions.² While this paper agrees that this is generally true, it will explore further how regional associations (or *huiguan*, *Landsmannschaften*) have acted as a 'bonding' mechanism which sustains native place consciousness as

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Titles within quotations marks indicate original English titles. If any reader is interested in knowing the Chinese characters, please write to me and I would be happy to supply them.

¹ Explanations for the prevalence and intensity of regional sentiments are given in two classic works, Duo Jiliang, *Tongxiang zushi zhi yanjiu* (The study of regional institutions) (Chongqing, 1942) and Ho Ping-ti, *Zhongguo huiguan shilun* ('An historical survey of Landsmannschaften in China') (Taipei, 1966).

² Dou, *Tongxiang zushi zhi yanjiu*, p. 1.

well as reinforces regional loyalty. Regional associations are in fact understudied, and the few works there are on the subject have tended to focus on other issues: the way they take care of the local needs of the migrant, their internal organizational structure, ethnicity (and sub-ethnicity) and inter-communal relations, their role as guardians of traditional values and the challenge of modernization, and their relations with Chinese nationalism.³ As relatively little has been said of their role as a bridge with the native place, this paper will show through the experience of Hong Kong's regional associations that this is indeed an important dimension of their work.

The paper is divided into three broad historical phases: from the 19th century to 1949, 1949 to the late 1970s, and the late 1970s to 1990.

The First Phase: to 1949

Regional associations began appearing in Hong Kong in the mid-19th century, their numbers growing slowly around the 1910s when there was an upsurge, prompting one British official to call the formation of these organizations a 'principal development' of the

³ These include Lawrence Crissman, 'The segmentary structure of urban overseas Chinese communities', *Man*, 2 (1967) 185-204; Gary G. Hamilton, 'Ethnicity and regionalism; some factors influencing Chinese identities in southeast Asia', *Ethnicity*, 4 (1977) 337-351; L. Eve Armentrout Ma, 'Fellow-regional associations in the Ch'ing dynasty; organizations in flux for mobile people. A preliminary survey', *Modern Asian Studies* 18:2 (1984) 307-30; Cheng Lim Keak, 'Reflections on the changing roles of Chinese clan associations in Singapore', *Asian Culture* 14 (April 1990) 57-71; Vincent Ng Wing Chung, 'Huiguan. Regional Institutions in the Development of Overseas Chinese Nationalism in Singapore 1912-41' (Unpublished M. Phil. thesis, Department of History, University of Hong Kong, 1987). One work on the subject that has appeared since this paper was presented is Bryna Goodman's, *Native Place, City, and Nation. Regional Networks and Identities in Shanghai, 1853-1937* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995).

Edgar Wickberg, 'Chinese organizations and ethnicity in southeast Asia and North America since 1945: a comparative analysis' in Jennifer Cushman and Wang Gungwu (eds), *Changing Identities of the Southeast Asian Chinese since World War II* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1988) 303-18 and Chinben See, 'Chinese organizations and ethnic identity in the Philippines', *ibid.*, 319-34 deal with the Chinese identity rather than regional identity.

Dou, *Tongxiang zushi zhi yanjiu* is especially concerned with how to extend regionalism to nationalism.

TABLE 1
Formation of Regional Associations over Time and Geographical Distribution

Years	Total	Guangdong	Fujian	Other provinces
Up to 1910	10	9	1	
1911-1920	17	15	1	1
1921-1930	10	9		1
1931-1940	10	6	3	1
1941-1949	21	18		3
1950-1960	27	25		2
1961-1970	44	37	3	4
1971-1978	30	26		4
1979-1990	52	31	13	8
Totals	221	176	21	24

Sources: various.

time.⁴ (See Table 1) Since then, there has been a steady increase, with new ones appearing as recently as 1991. Over the years, their functions have changed with historical circumstances, but despite the changes, the existence of regional associations testifies to the vitality of native place consciousness.

Most of Hong Kong's regional associations, like those of other societies, were founded primarily to foster comradeship among fellow-regionals by providing mutual support in a strange land. Acting as a focus for social, cultural, religious and economic activities for *tong-xiang* (fellow-regionals), they enhanced solidarity. In practical terms they facilitated trade and employment opportunities and sometimes helped in monopolizing certain trades and crafts for the group against strangers. In these respects they were very similar to guilds. But the fact that they were oriented toward the native place was a vital distinguishing factor. The additional spatial and emotional dimension led to a whole range of different functions.

In fact they were tri-focal. One focus, of course, was the welfare of members in Hong Kong. Another focus was the home region, the main topic of this paper, and the third was the global network formed by their counterparts in different parts of the world.

⁴ 'Registrar General's Report, 1910', *Hong Kong Administrative Report, 1910* (1911), p. C.17; *Hong Kong Hansard, 1911*, p. 204. For an account of Hong Kong's regional associations before 1945, see Elizabeth Sinn, 'A history of regional associations in pre-War Hong Kong' in Sinn (ed.), *Between East and West: Aspects of Social and Political Development in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1990), pp. 159-86.

Regional associations bonded the migrant to the native place in both emotional and practical terms. By providing a setting for fellow-regionals far removed from the home region to speak the same dialect, share information about the native place, enjoy and perform native art forms, participate in spring and autumn sacrifices, sweep communal graves at *chongyang* and *qingming*, they offered the opportunity for the constant renewal of regional identity. In other words, they prevented the alienation and 'de-regionalization' of the individual migrant through different forms of emotional resuscitation.

At the same time, they also maintained ties with the native place in concrete ways.

The dissemination of information

Regional associations generally were centres of information where members could catch up on goings-on back home. In turn, they were especially handy when those at home needed to spread information/propaganda to or make contact with their members outside. They were, for instance, very useful for locating 'lost' persons. Later, this contact was formalized in newsletters, which were published either by regional associations or by organizations in the native place for distribution to tongxiang through regional associations.⁵

Returning the dead

Another important work of the regional associations was returning the dead to the native place. Death, and handling the dead, were important issues to the Chinese. It was observed in the 19th century

⁵ Unfortunately there has been no systematic collection or research on these materials which are mainly ephemeral. It is also impossible to establish when they first appeared, although the earliest at hand are from the 1930s and this seems to have been part of the nationalist propaganda effort as a whole. I have seen 1941 editions of the *Jinri Zhongshan* (Zhongshan today) 1938 edition of the *Zhongshan haiwai tongxiang jinan zonghui jikan* (Quarterly of the overseas Zhongshan society for saving disaster areas) and 1941 edition of the *Guizhou yuebao* (Guizhou monthly) edited by the Guizhou (of Shunde county) Tongxianghui, Hong Kong.

Those published after the war include Sanshui Tongxianghui's *Sanshui xunkan*, (Ten day publication of Sanshui) 1946-1949; *Fengling qiaosheng* published by the Shunde Lianyi Zonghui from 1947; and *Baogao* by the Lü Gang Nanhai Jiujiang Shanghui ('Kow Kong Commercial Association, Hong Kong') from 1946.

that, to the Chinese, 'the dead are sometimes of greater moment than the living',⁶ a revelation that explains much about Chinese behaviour. For the deceased, having a decent burial and being accessible to the 'worshipping' of one's descendants were the baseline. Not surprisingly, providing adequate burial service to poor tongxiang was one of the primary impetuses for formal regional associations to emerge in 19th century Hong Kong. There was often a more significant, extraterritorial dimension to this activity: to enable wherever possible the shipment of coffins/bones to the native place for interment or reinterment. Thus, even if the migrant could not die in the native place, which would have been ideal, at least he could be buried there. This was the ultimate meaning of 'returning to the roots' and in many instances it was the regional association that made it possible.

The case of the Shunde association, the Mianyuantang, illustrates this function very well. Established in 1876, it was one of the organizations founded expressly to care for the dead. Initially it managed cemeteries and offered free burials to destitute Shunde natives in Hong Kong. It ensured that grave-sweeping was carried out at qingming and chongyang and organized shipments of coffins and bones to China. In 1895, it even raised a large fund to purchase land in Shunde's capital city, Daliang, to build a coffin repository for receiving human remains from and through Hong Kong. Another society well known for its contribution in this area was the Dongyitang founded by Dongguan fellow-regionals in 1893.⁷

Disaster relief and public works

Another area where the regional association was indispensable was in organizing disaster relief for the native place—indispensable not only to undertake administrative and organizational tasks but to remind fellow-regionals of their obligation to the guxiang, and appeal to his loyalty. Throughout the late 19th and early 20th cen-

⁶ 'Registrar-General's Report for 1891', *Hong Kong Government Gazette*, 1892, p. 366.

⁷ *Shunde Lianyi Zonghui chuangli sanshi zhounian jinian tekan* (Special bulletin to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the 'Shun Tak Fraternal Association') (1977) pp. 104, 106; *Xianggang Dongguan Gongshang Zonghui liushi zhounian jinian tekan* (Special bulletin to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the 'General Commercial Association of Tung Kun Merchants Resident in Hong Kong') (1971) p. 4.

turies, different parts of China were struck by flood and drought, and on many occasions, Hong Kong's regional associations came to the rescue. In fact, the Yangjiang Tongxianghui was founded in the 1920s specifically for this purpose.⁸

Members did more than just raising money. Sometimes, they were sent from Hong Kong to organize *pingtiao*, the sale of cheap rice, and to repair river embankments against floods. Regional associations acted separately or, when the disaster was severe, took concerted action. In 1922, for instance, when the Shantou–Xiamen region was badly hit by storm and tidal-wave, many regional societies sent donations through the Chaozhou Shanghui (lit. merchants' association, but often translated as Chamber of Commerce); they also jointly raised funds to relieve flood victims in North China.⁹

Concern for the home region was expressed in more constructive ways as well. Many regional associations organized contributions toward the building and operation of schools in the native place, and raised funds for hospitals, orphanages and lunatic asylums. Some even made donations toward projects for tongxiang who had migrated to other localities. In 1923, for instance, the Taishan Shanghui in Hong Kong helped to set up the Taishan Huiguan in Beijing.¹⁰ Thus although many had left their home regions, they could still demonstrate their loyalty and concern for it through the service of the regional association.

Local politics and public affairs

On occasions when migrants wished to influence local politics at home, the representation of the regional association was equally indispensable. This was particularly necessary before 1949 when many Chinese residents in Hong Kong still had extensive family and economic interests there. Attempts to interfere first became common

⁸ Lü Gang *Yangjiang Tongxianghui chengli wushi zhounian ji youxian gongsi di wujie jianshi jiuzhi jinian tekan* (Special bulletin to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Yangjiang regional association and the inauguration of the 5th board of directors of the corporation) (1977) p. 60.

⁹ Lü Gang *Chaozhou Shanghui sanshiwu zhounian jinian tekan* (Special bulletin to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the 'Chiu Chow' Chamber of Commerce) (1951) pp. 4–8.

¹⁰ *Xianggang Taishan Shanghui huikan 1963–1964* (Publication of the 'Toi Shan Association of Hong Kong' 1963–1964) [1964] p. 9.

after 1911 when the fall of the Qing regime led to a collapse of law and order in many parts of Guangdong province, which fell into the hands of a rapid succession of local strong men. Alarmed Hong Kong merchants went about organizing regional *shanghui* to raise funds and influence the local powers that be in order to safeguard the well-being and security of their home regions. For this purpose, organizations such as the Shunde Chamber of Commerce and the Heshan Trading Associations were initially founded.¹¹ This development was significant for creating another channel through which Hong Kong merchants could participate in local politics on the Mainland.

To improve security, some of the Hong Kong associations even helped to organize local defence in their native regions. They also interfered in local affairs by being mediators. In the early Republican period, it became quite common for natives of the various localities to appeal to their tongxiang overseas both to act as arbiters in disputes and to make representations of various kinds on their behalf to the Chinese authorities. Perhaps it was thought that, though living abroad, as natives of the regions, they would have sufficient knowledge and interest and yet be far enough away to be objective.

The regional associations' motive for such activities was no doubt concern for the well-being of the home region; it might also have given great psychological satisfaction to feel that one could wield influence in one's ancestral home—a need apparently very deep-seated in the traditional Chinese psyche. To some extent, they did exert influence. Their remittances and generous monetary contributions gave weight to their opinion on public matters.

They also made representation to different levels of the Chinese government on behalf of the native regions. As widespread banditry and atrocities committed by military commanders and regular troops brought unbelievable hardship to Guangdong in the 1910s and 1920s, Hong Kong's regional associations approached the various Chinese authorities on many occasions, requesting them to release detained persons, to maintain law and order and discipline their troops. In 1921, for example, the Xinhui Shanghui wrote to Sun Yat-sen at Guangzhou to restrain a military commander who had commandeered a school's funds to pay his troops. The regional shanghui interfered with local administration on many points too,

¹¹ *Huazi ribao* ('Chinese Mail') 16/11 and 15/12/1911.

ranging from the routing of a new road to how the customs services should be run.¹²

This kind of activity continued through the 20s and 30s, and resumed after 1945 when the war ended.

Repatriation of persons

The need to organize repatriation for overseas Chinese grew in proportion to the number of Chinese going abroad. While the wealthy and the healthy could travel home of their own accord, not so the destitute and invalid, and since the mid-19th century, countless of them had gone home only with the help of some organization or other. Hong Kong, being the gateway to China, saw thousands of Chinese going home, many repatriated by the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals¹³ in co-operation with the Hong Kong government. During certain crises, the numbers were staggering, as during the depression years when tens of thousands who had lost their jobs abroad, in Nan-yang in particular, had to be sent back to the Mainland.¹⁴

Another crisis occurred during the Japanese occupation. The Hong Kong population fell from 1.6 million in December 1941 to between 500,000 and 600,000 in August 1945. The Japanese government, keen to reduce the population in the colony which was short on all supplies, urged people to leave, and many did so with the assistance

¹² Accounts of the regional associations' interference in China can be seen in: *Lü Gang Chaozhou Shanghui sanshi zhounian jinian tekan*, pp. 8-9; *Yijiu wuwu nian Xianggang Siyi Shanggong Zonghui niankan*, (1955 Journal of the Sze Yap Chamber of Commerce of Hong Kong) pp. 45-50; *Qiao Gang Xinhui Shanghui gaikuang* (General conditions of the 'San Wui Merchants' Association') [1934] pp. 17-19, 110-11, 181-90; *Shunde Lianyi Zonghui chuangli sanshi zhounian jinian tekan* p. 103; *Lü Gang Mingqiao Fuzhou Tongxianghui huikan* (Bulletin of the Foochow Association) (1939) pp. 3-4 (separate pagination); *Lü Gang Nanhai Shanghui sanshiwu zhounian tekan* (Special bulletin to commemorate the 35th anniversary of the 'Nanhai Traders' Association') (1947) pp. 5-6; *Lü Gang Sanshui tongxianghui jinxi jinian tekan* (Special bulletin to commemorate the Golden Jubilee of the 'Samshui Native Association') (1962), pp. 51-4; [Tung Tsin Association] *Jinxi dasha luocheng shijie Keshu kenqin dahui jinian tekan* (Special publication to commemorate the completion of the golden jubilee building and International Conference of Kejia) (1971) pp. 11-13; *Xianggang Heshan tongxianghui huikan* (Journal of the 'Hok Shan Association') (1978) p. 36.

¹³ The Tung Wah Group of Hospitals is a major Chinese charitable organization in Hong Kong which offers a wide range of social services beside the medical.

¹⁴ See the Hong Kong 'Harbour Master's Reports' for the respective years. In 1931, for instance, 28,314 persons were repatriated through Hong Kong by the combined efforts of the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals and the government.

of regional associations. In fact, a Su-Zhe Tongxianghui (regional association for Jiangsu and Zhejiang) was founded in 1942 especially to take care of refugees.¹⁵ For regional associations which continued to operate through the occupation period, organizing the repatriation of their fellow-regionals became the main task. This was complicated work, involving finding passage, providing a small cash allowance for the road, and in cases of land routes, arranging for food stations to be set up all along the route.¹⁶ The task was especially arduous considering the very difficult conditions which then prevailed.

When peace came, many refugees returned to China from Hong Kong or through Hong Kong, and regional associations again bore the brunt of repatriation work with the co-ordination of the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals.

1945-1949

With the War over, regional associations resumed all aspects of their pre-War work, but with new gusto. In the prevailing post-War euphoria, the old links with the guxiang were re-established more fervently than ever before. From 1945 to 1949, the most poignant subjects in the newsletters published by Hong Kong's regional associations were the need for reconstruction and disaster relief. In fact some of the new tongxianghui established at this point had as their main objective the rebuilding of the home region. The slogan 'Jianxiang jianguo' (construct the village, construct the nation) was widely propagated. Fellow-regionals abroad contributed to every conceivable activity ranging from subsidizing the home region's team to the All-Guangdong Games to large-scale efforts at repairing and restoring river embankments before and during floods. In between, funds were raised for the restoration of important buildings, the re-establishment of schools, hospitals and other forms of public works, reviving charitable organizations, resettling refugees, caring for destitute children, loans to farmers, planting trees. In addition plans were drawn for less urgent but equally essential projects such as the editing of gazetteers, the redrawing of regional maps and the

¹⁵ *Su-Zhe Lü Gang Tongxianghui tekan* ('Kiangsu [Jiangsu] and Chekiang [Zhejiang] Association of Hong Kong') [1953] p. 29.

¹⁶ These efforts were reported in the *Wah Kiu Yat Po* throughout the occupation period. See for example 3/5/42, 15/5/42, 30/5/42, 4/6/42 and 13/6/42 etc.

restoration of monuments. Fellow-regionals were exhorted to make donations; but it was also emphasized that viable investments could be made in transport, industry and agriculture. The Luxi Highway and Transport Company in Sanshui, for instance, was financed entirely by 'overseas Chinese' with the Hong Kong association assuming a central role in promoting the corporation.¹⁷

In fact, whether for charity or investment, Hong Kong's regional associations helped by rallying fellow-regionals overseas and by receiving and remitting funds. Apart from a period of exchange controls after the War, Hong Kong, being a free exchange market, had always been ideally situated for such money transfers; and even when exchange controls were in effect, ways were found to get around them.¹⁸ Besides this, Hong Kong's regional associations were able to play this role—not only in receiving the money but in supervising its proper use—because of the trust given by associations elsewhere, and squabble over funds appears to be rare.

A major test for Hong Kong's associations came during the floods in 1947–48 when the territory's own economic and social life had yet to recover fully. After a year of severe drought, heavy rains from June 1947 caused havoc, bursting embankments in many parts of the Pearl River Delta. Days later, the Tung Wah Group took upon itself to organize relief: the Guangdong Flood Relief Fund it organized was soon to cover also Guangxi and Fujian as well. Besides raising huge funds, many of Hong Kong's regional associations actively fought the floods, in some cases under the Tung Wah Group's leadership.

Associations of regions worst hit by the floods—the East River area, the Gaoming-Gaoyao counties and the Siyi counties—were delegated special duties. They were given funds, raised from different sources but earmarked for their region, to hold in trust. For instance, when the East River embankments were damaged, funds were allocated to the Dongguan Gongshang Zonghui (lit. Dongguan general association of industry and commerce) for repair works. Likewise,

¹⁷ See *Sanshui xunkan*, 1946–49 and *Fengling qiaosheng*, 1947–49, *passim*.

For the post-war development of Hong Kong's regional associations, see Elizabeth Sinn, 'Challenges and responses: The development of Hong Kong's regional associations 1945–1990', conference paper presented at the 12th conference of the International Association of Historians of Asia, at the University of Hong Kong, 24–28 June, 1991.

¹⁸ *Xianggang Huaqiao tuanti zonglan* (Directory of overseas Chinese organizations in Hong Kong) (Hong Kong: [1948]) part 4, p. 9.

when the Han River was flooded, funds were allocated to the Chaozhou Tongxianghui whose members personally took the relief materials to the disaster area.¹⁹

As always, the work involved more than just collecting money: the associations were committed to supervising and overseeing the engineering work and the proper use of the fund. Moreover, their officials went to inspect disaster areas and distributed relief materials. All this not only meant increasing the administrative burden of the associations but also their representatives had to make many trips to the home region in the appalling weather of 1947–48, often at their own expense. The spirit of personal sacrifice is impressive. At least one association had its inauguration held up in 1947 because its members were too preoccupied with relief work.²⁰

In addition, the newsletters reported closely on the local administration, scrutinizing and criticizing any corruption, abuse and inefficiency. Many did not hesitate to criticize the Guomindang when they felt that the home region's social and economic well-being was threatened. Though there was little direct participation in the establishment of local autonomy, which was set afoot after the War, the Jiujiang Shanghui did plan to send representatives to promote local autonomy in Jiujiang city, and the Shunde Six Districts Committee was set up in 1948 to help organize local defence.²¹ There was keen interest in such developments, and a general recognition that only by strengthening local autonomy could reforms really be introduced.

1949 to the Late 1970s

The establishment of the People's Republic of China, followed by the closing of the borders with Hong Kong, heralded an unprecedented situation where the home village became largely out of bounds. Moreover, 'regionalism' was frowned upon by the new regime as a divisive and backward force, and the old ties were slowly severed. While in the past, part of the regional association network had been

¹⁹ *Xianggang Donghua San Yuan Chouzen Liang Guang shuicai teji* (Special bulletin on the Guangdong and Guangxi flood relief organized by the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals of Hong Kong) (Hong Kong: 1948), *passim*.

²⁰ *Fengling qiaosheng*, 1 (1947.9), p. 3.

²¹ [Jiujiang shanghui] *Baogao*, 3 (15/4/46); *Fengling qiaosheng* 7 (6/6/48); the Taisan Shanghui also helped in organizing defence, see *Xianggang Huaqiao tuanti zonglan*, part 4, p. 9.

on the Mainland, regional associations there simply disappeared (self-destructed, so to speak) after 1950. Organizations overseas, as a result, seem to have been cut off from the source of inspiration, deprived of their roots. Newsletters which had depended heavily on the home region for information ceased publication.

One of the last gestures by Hong Kong regional associations to help the guxiang was in February 1950 when the Su-Zhe Tongxianghui responded to Shanghai's Ningbo Tongxianghui's call to raise funds for air-raid victims.²² In 1952, the Chaolian Association went so far as to stipulate that natives residing in the home region and not in Hong Kong were no longer qualified to join.²³ An even more final gesture can be seen in the 'transfer' of the Hongsheng god from Chaolian village in Xinhui county to Hong Kong in 1955, as if to symbolize a complete severance.²⁴

Consequently, from the 1950s on, the energy of Hong Kong's regional associations was devoted to serving their members' local needs. They continued operating schools and clinics, organizing social and cultural activities—such as grave-sweeping, performing certain art forms, celebrating certain religious festivals—providing funereal expenses, and so on. Although these activities still did, to some extent, help to sustain native place consciousness, the once important native-place oriented, 'bridging' dimension of their activities retreated into abeyance.

The 'bamboo curtain', however, was unable to resist all attempts to communicate with the guxiang. Individuals from Hong Kong, of course, could still maintain ties with it to some extent, visiting, sending remittances and sending aid when necessary. Some associations also managed to stay in touch in low key, notably the Fujian Shanghui and Fujian Tongxianghui. Strong supporters of the GMD government before the Liberation, they transferred their loyalty to the new PRC government, and continued its motto—'aixiang aiguo' (love the village, love the nation). The Fujian Tongxianghui helped individual members maintain ties with the Mainland in a number of ways. At a time when travelling in China was extremely difficult, it organized a 'travel department' to facilitate tongxiang returning to the home regions. In times of scarcity on the Mainland, it helped to

²² *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 6/2/50.

²³ *Lü Gang Xinhui Chaolian Tongxianghui chengli ershiwu zhounian yinxi jinian tekan* ('25th anniversary edition of the Society of Natives of Chiu Lin in Hong Kong 1972') p. 87.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

transmit relief parcels from Hong Kong as well as Southeast Asia.²⁵ Not surprisingly, the Hong Kong government looked upon it with suspicion.

External links

During this period, Hong Kong's regional associations continued to communicate in various ways with their counterparts overseas, including Taiwan, often under the auspices of Taipei's Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission. They remained an important source of information on the *guxiang* for Chinese in different parts of the world since they were still better placed to know about China than anyone else. They were sometimes the only point of communication, however tenuous, between the native place and its native sons in the outside world.

In the 1960s, the Fujian Tongxianghui also helped overseas Chinese from countries without diplomatic relations with China communicate with their Mainland relatives by arranging for them to meet at places such as Shenzhen and Jiangmen.²⁶ In this clandestine manner the Tongxianghui played a vital and unique role when the door to China was barely ajar.

The Late 1970s to 1990

For almost 25 years, Hong Kong's regional associations operated, one could say, in a near void, largely cut off from their main source of inspiration. At the same time, a younger generation grew up in Hong Kong with little or no impression of the *guxiang*, and under the influence of a more or less uniform education system and the local media, they grew up in an increasingly homogeneous society where regional differences were fast diminishing, and for many, family ties and business ties with the native place had completely vanished. Not surprisingly, a number of the regional associations became increasingly inactive, and some existed only on paper.

²⁵ *Xianggang Fujian Tongxianghui jinxi jinian tekan 1939-1989* (Special bulletin to commemorate the golden jubilee of the Fujian Regional Association in Hong Kong 1939-1989), p. 71.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

However, this is not the whole picture. The population did not remain static, and over the years, it was constantly replenished by new arrivals from the Mainland whose memory of the native place remained strong and fresh.²⁷ New regional associations continued to emerge after 1950 (see Table 1). And, just as people began to speculate that regional associations might have lost much of their *raison d'être*, China's opening in the late 1970s injected new life into them. Now that the guxiang was again accessible, and indeed, fervently beckoning its native sons, the situation changed dramatically.

China's open policy

China's new open policy entailed a total reversal of its attitude toward overseas Chinese. The two provinces where the new policy was first launched, Fujian and Guangdong, are also China's major *qiaoxiang* (localities from which many people had emigrated overseas), with strong ties with overseas Chinese, a source of capital and expertise that China was now anxious to tap.²⁸ Thus the economic opening of the two provinces was accompanied by intensive *qiaowu* (overseas affairs) activities.²⁹ One of the first practical steps was to rectify past wrongs: to clear the names of *guiqiao* (returned emigrants) and *qiaojuan* (family members of Chinese overseas) wrongfully accused and punished during the cultural revolution, and to help them solve such problems as housing, salary assessment, pro-

²⁷ The percentage of locally born in Hong Kong in 1991 was 60; 34% of the population were born in China. The locally born percentage over the years was: 26.7 (1921), 32.5 (1931), 47.7 (1961), 56.4 (1971), 57 (1981). This shows that the growth in the percentage has slowed down considerably since 1971, and that many of the residents are adult emigrants.

²⁸ Almost 80% of the Chinese who had migrated overseas had come from Guangdong and the next largest number have come from Fujian. Ezra F. Vogel, *One Step Ahead in China. Guangdong under Reform* (Cambridge, Mass; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 82.

²⁹ Though Chinese in Hong Kong are, strictly speaking, categorized as *tongbao* ('compatriots') rather than *Huaqiao* (overseas Chinese), to all intents and purposes this new policy applied equally to them. For Beijing's overseas Chinese policy, see Stephen Fitzgerald, *China and the Overseas Chinese. A Study of Peking's Changing Policy 1949-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972). For an interesting comparison, see Wing Chung Ng, 'Taiwan's overseas Chinese policy from 1949 to the early 1980s', in *East Asia Inquiry: Selected Articles from the Annual Conference of the Canadian Asian Studies Association 1988-1990*, edited by Larry N. Shyu, Min-sun Chen, Claude-Yves Charron and Matsuo Soga (Montreal: CASA, 1991), pp. 265-86.

motion, their children's education, employment and so forth. Steps were also taken to restore to overseas Chinese properties forcibly occupied or confiscated. Likewise, assurance was given to 'protect' remittances by overseas Chinese, both money for supporting families and donations, to win their good will.³⁰ In short, the admission by the country's leaders that the previous overseas Chinese policy was erroneous was manifest in deed as well as in word. These actions were profusely reported in Hong Kong's leftish papers and gradually announced to, and through, regional associations.

These reforms were welcomed by Chinese overseas. The Fujian Shanghui, not surprisingly, responded promptly and enthusiastically.³¹ It soon busied itself obtaining travel documents to China for its members.³² It even advertised in the newspapers, appealing for materials for the writing of a history of overseas Chinese to show how highly they were regarded.³³ With economic reform the new national goal, ideological dogmatism unabashedly gave way to *minzu zhuyi* (nationalism) a sentiment that appeals to Chinese everywhere. Realizing that regional sentiments are as strong as, if not stronger than, national sentiments, attempts to reach Chinese abroad were made at the central as well as the local levels. The old slogan 'aixiang aiguo, jianxiang jianguo' (Love the village, love the nation; build the village, build the nation), so powerful during the War against Japan and the immediate post-War years, was revived.

Even bolder action followed. The Qiaolian (Union of returned overseas Chinese), a civilian organization, and state authorities from different localities and on different levels, devised ways to reach out to their overseas tongxiang. They resumed the publication of pamphlets and newsletters as a means to re-establish ties, and soon there was a flood of them. They made great efforts to induce overseas Chinese to return and lavished hospitality on those who did. While the very prominent members of Hong Kong society could be easily identified,³⁴ the less prominent but nevertheless moneyed tongxiang were more difficult to trace, and the existing regional associations

³⁰ Lin Wensheng, 'Ruhe fahui qiaoxiang youshi' (How to maximize on the advantages of the *qiaoxiang*?) *Huaxia*, 1 (1985.1), pp. 31-3, 32.

³¹ *Wenhui bao* 7/1/79.

³² *Xinwan bao* 23/8/79; by September 1982, it had obtained entry permits to China for 24,000 persons. (*Wenhui bao*, 5/9/82).

³³ *Wenhui bao*, 1/6/79.

³⁴ For example, as early as October 1979, the Overseas Affairs Office, the Qiaowu ban, in Beijing received groups from Hong Kong and answered queries regarding investments and entry and exit regulations. (*Xinwan bao* 4/10/79).

were used to seek them out. The associations' continued ties with tongxiang in other parts of the world also made them invaluable.³⁵

Competition between the different localities was keen. As Chinese could think of the home locality on different levels—province, prefecture, county, xiang and cun—government and qiaolian officials at different levels competed to first make contact with, and tap the resources of, their tongxiang abroad.

Renewing ties

The effect of the 'offensive' was soon felt in Hong Kong. The qiaolian's methods to reach their natives, aimed at plucking their heart strings, were indeed very creative.³⁶ As early as 1979, the Lanzhen Tongxianghui's members were invited to attend the chrysanthemum festival in the home region. This festival, unique to Lanzhen, naturally stirred up much nostalgia and became very well received. In the case of Sanshui, the *hehua* bird feasts, irresistible to its natives, was used.³⁷ The local 'specialty' could also be exported; countless opera groups from various localities were sent to rekindle native place sentiments.³⁸ Many of these opera forms had not been performed in Hong Kong or China for two decades, and rich in local colours, they were like manna from heaven for starving tongxiang.

There were other tactics. In 1979, Shunde tongxiang in Hong Kong were invited to attend the opening of the Huaqiao secondary school in Daliang, mainly, it appears, to attract some of the richer tongxiang to return.³⁹ The chairman of the Shunde Lianyi Zonghui was among the guests. Subsequently, members of the Zonghui were invited to attend other functions,⁴⁰ and the head of Shunde county visited the Zonghui in November 1980.⁴¹ These tactics worked. The

³⁵ Vogel, p. 63.

³⁶ *Huaxia*, 1 (1985.1), p. 39 gives instructions as to how to appeal to overseas Chinese.

³⁷ *Xianggang Lanzhen Tongxianghui chengli liushi zhounian jinian juankan* ('The Association of Siulamese in Hong Kong 60th Anniversary 1921–1981') p. 61; *Lü Gang Sanshui Tongxianghui chunjie kengin dahui tekan* (Special bulletin of the New Year gathering of the 'Samshui Native Association') (1982) p. 27.

³⁸ For instance, see *Jiangmen Yueju tuan yan chu tekan* (Special bulletin on the performance of the Jiangmen Cantonese opera troupe [in Hong Kong] (1988).

³⁹ *Wenhui bao*, 18/5/79.

⁴⁰ *Wenhui bao*, 5/6/79.

⁴¹ *Wenhui bao*, 1/11/80.

society again became concerned with guxiang developments: it showed its loyalty and interest by making donations itself, while calling on members to do the same. By 1985, it had helped collect \$8 million for projects of all kinds.⁴²

The Shunde pattern was to be repeated. Local government and qiaolian officials arrived in Hong Kong in increasing numbers to seek out their respective tongxiang. Invariably they reported enthusiastically on the economic progress made and the improved qiaowu situation at home, and appealed for help in 'jiaxiang jianshe' (construction of the home region). When the Taishan county group first arrived, they met tongxiang 'who show[ed] concern for the four modernizations'.⁴³ It was not just the pro-Mainland Siyi Huiso which received these dignitaries, but soon the Taishan Shanghui, which had a more detached 'political' stand, also responded to their overtures. The Shanghui became a major donor, its donations including \$1 million for a bridge and \$8 million for the People's Hospital.⁴⁴ By the mid 1980s, it appears that hardly a day went by without some mission—medical, trade, educational or otherwise—from some locality in China visiting the colony, and keeping their tongxiang busy entertaining them.

Local response

Doubtless the initiative came from the Mainland and response from Hong Kong varied. Though it was tacitly understood that the local authorities and qiaolian would avoid discussing politics and ideology, some of the more conservative and pro-Taiwan regional associations stayed aloof.

On the other hand, many associations were excited by the new situation. Now that it was accessible, the guxiang was becoming again a source of attraction, and regional associations' attention was turned once more in that direction, reactivating many functions terminated by the Liberation.

They resumed the once vital duty of being a bridge between local members and the native place. In the early 1980s when travelling in China was still difficult and communication was primitive, they

⁴² *Wenhui bao*, 16/12/85.

⁴³ *Wenhui bao*, 21/6/80.

⁴⁴ *Xianggang Taishan Shanghui di qi jie huikan* (Bulletin of the 'Toi Shan Association of Hong Kong Ltd.') (1988), pp. 61–2.

played an important role in making travelling arrangements. They supplied information of all kinds. They helped members trace relatives, some long-lost. They received enquiries from members about properties now returned to them on how to go about reclaiming their properties, especially when over the years, many had lost their title deeds.⁴⁵ Some wished to purchase new properties designated for Chinese overseas. Others asked about investment opportunities.

Most significantly, it was now again viable for the associations to help older and poorer members return to the native place to spend their remaining years, and to organize burial grounds there. In other words, it was possible, once again, to return to the roots. Interestingly, they are now keeping those who have returned to reside in the native place in recent years informed about Hong Kong.

Even when communications improved and individuals found it easier to travel, the regional associations' work is not done. Many still continue to organize tours for their members to visit the home region.⁴⁶ The Sanshui Tongxianghui which first sent a group in 1977 to attend the hehua bird feast, was still organizing these tours in 1992, and the number this year was larger than ever before. Summer camps in the home region for young tongxiang were also organized by a number of regional associations, notably the Longyan and Hebei-Shandong associations.

Clearly, regional associations are still useful for activities at certain levels such as raising big sums of money for public works or disaster relief. The donations made by the Shunde natives were by no means unique. In 1982, when floods hit Qingyuan county, the Qingyuan Gonghui allocated \$100,000 for rice for the flood victims, while sending a 'comfort mission' to the disaster area. Under its auspices, its members donated a further \$450,000. Likewise, the various Fujian groups combined to raise \$6 million for relief when natural disasters fell on Fujian in 1988.⁴⁷ The Chaozhou Shanghui donated \$2 million to build a sports stadium in the home region,

⁴⁵ Interview with Mr Shi Ziqing of the Jinjiang Tongxianghui, 9/10/90.

⁴⁶ I conducted a survey in 1989/1990 when questionnaires were sent to 316 regional associations whose names are known. 146 responded; I was able to gather some information from various sources on 104 which did not respond; the rest, 66, I know nothing about except the name. Of the 146 respondents, 83 claim that they organize tours to the guxiang.

⁴⁷ *Wenhui bao*, 18/5/82 and 3/7/82; *Xianggang Fujian Tongxianghui jinxi jinian tekan* 1939-1989, p. 77.

and raised over \$800,000 for typhoon relief in 1987.⁴⁸ The Sanshui Binguang (hotel), which was built partly with funds raised by the Sanshui Tongxianghui in Hong Kong and in other countries, is another example of collective action.⁴⁹

This also applies whenever questions or disputes about land and land rights in the native place arose: the associations' representation is obviously more effective than individual action. It was, likewise, much easier for the association to organize activities such as inviting performing opera troupes or football teams from the native region to Hong Kong.⁵⁰ And the task to instil native place consciousness in the younger generation also fell on the associations.

Though there are now many other channels for making business contacts, they have not completely replaced regional associations as an important link in this area.⁵¹ For instance, firms set up by various local governments (Mainland) in Hong Kong in order to import and export more directly, are inclined to keep in close touch with the corresponding regional associations in order to consult members who are more familiar with Hong Kong conditions and more experienced with international trade and the open market. In turn, the Hong Kong tongxiang make use of the business opportunities these firms offer. The case of the Zinxu Company set up by the Sanshui county government seems to illustrate the mutual benefits which arise from this form of co-operation.⁵² Apart from business, tongxianghui have also facilitated exchange in science and technology.⁵³ It is obvious

⁴⁸ *Xianggang Chaozhou Shanghui chengli qishi zhounian jinian tekan* (Special bulletin to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the 'Chiu Chow Chamber of Commerce') (1991) pp. 139-40, 141-2.

Of the 146 respondents, 84 state they raise funds for charitable works at home, which could include disaster relief.

⁴⁹ In return, all members of the tongxianghui staying at the hotel enjoy a 20% discount (Telephone interview with Mr Qian Jianwei, of the Sanshui Tongxianghui, 19/10/92). The Lanzhen Tongxianghui also raised funds for a hotel and a opera house (Questionnaire response). Seventy-four of my respondents state they help in the organizing of public services in the home region. Presumably this mainly refers to raising funds for various projects. Many associations propagate the importance of constructing the home region and promoting its prosperity.

⁵⁰ *Xianggang Chaozhou Shanghui chengli qishi zhounian jinian tekan*, p. 142; *Xianggang Fujian Tongxianghui jinxi jinian tekan 1939-1989*, p. 77.

⁵¹ Of the 146 respondents, 60 state that they facilitate trade with the native place.

⁵² Telephone interview with Mr Qian Jingwei, 19/10/92.

⁵³ *Ji-Lu Lü Gang Tongxianghui chengli qishi zhounian tekan* (Special bulletin to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Hebei-Shandong regional association) (1987) (no pagination).

that the guxiang-oriented dimension of their work has been revived, and is once again a major focus.

Unprecedented circumstances

It may appear that as the bonds between regional associations and the native place are re-established, the pre-1949 situation has returned.⁵⁴ But, in fact, this is not so, and the situation in the 1980s was unprecedented in several significant ways.

First, the 'offensive' taken by the Mainland was much more intense and extensive than ever before 1949. The Mainlanders came not only from Guangdong and Fujian, but from further north and south—from Hubei, Zhejiang, even Hebei, Yunnan and Hainan. This shows how Hong Kong in the 1980s served as a gateway not only to south China, but to the whole country.

These contacts intensified the activities of some of the existing associations and, in other cases, led to the establishment of new ones. In 1980, the authorities from the port of Yonggang in Ningbo arrived, looking for contacts and investments for its ambitious port development project. One result of the visit was the formation of the Yonggang Lianyihui, whose express objective was to increase communication among Yonggang tongxiang in Hong Kong, and also between them and different business institutions in Yonggang. Wang Guancheng, one of Hong Kong's most prominent 'leftish' businessmen, was its first chairman.⁵⁵ This is only one example of business being a major motivation for tongxianghui formation in the 1980s, showing how the need for economic development on the Mainland has affected developments in Hong Kong.

Early contact was also made in 1982 between the Hebei authorities and the Ji-Lu (Hebei, Shandong) Tongxianghui, established in 1948 and one of the more established associations in Hong Kong. Its leaders have been repeatedly invited to the native place by provincial authorities since 1984, and the association has also organized many tour groups there, for visiting family and friends, for business, and for academic and scientific exchange. A total of \$350,000 was raised through it for the Yantai University in 1986, and individual mem-

⁵⁴ Ninety-nine respondents state that they maintain connections with the native place.

⁵⁵ *Wenhui Bao*, 31/7/80.

bers when visiting Shandong have made a total donation exceeding RMB¥500,000.⁵⁶

The vigour of Fujianese regional associations in the 1980s is also unprecedented. Of the 54 new tongxianghui known to have been founded between 1979 and 1990, 13 are Fujianese, and all are exceptionally dynamic.⁵⁷

This proliferation was partly the result of the growing population of Fujianese in Hong Kong—it is claimed that there are about 700,000 out of a total population of 6 million by 1990⁵⁸—and the economic development in Fujian province. There was also the need to strengthen contact with Taiwan, which had become one of the PRC's major objectives. As mentioned, even before 1987, when Taiwan residents were officially allowed to travel to the Mainland, many had already made their way in through Hong Kong. To facilitate links between Fujian and the outside world, including Taiwan, the Fujian Tongxianghui and Shanghui prompted the setting up in 1983 of two chartered flights from Hong Kong each week, one to Xiamen and one to Fuzhou. The Fujian Tongxianghui's Taiwan-related work intensified and became a priority in 1989. Every effort was made to communicate with Taiwan tongxiang, and, to encourage them to invest and trade in China and visit their relatives there, their travelling requirements were specially handled. It reserved blocks of seats on the chartered flights for them, helped them with immigration procedures, and converted one of its premises into a hostel to provide cheap accommodation for those in transit.⁵⁹ Other important and very active Fujian associations are those of Jinjiang and Longyan. Jinjiang tongxiang have started some 800 enterprises of various kinds in the country, making it a '100 million dollar county', and the Longyan Tongxianghui is particularly important in communicating with tongxiang in Taiwan and Southeast Asia.⁶⁰ It is interesting to note that a Taiwan Tongxianghui was founded in Hong Kong in 1989.

⁵⁶ *Ji-Lu Lü Gang Tongxianghui chengli sishi zhounian tekan* (no pagination).

⁵⁷ Among the first was the Nan'an Gonghui formed between 1979 and 1980. Its objectives were to unite overseas fellow regionals, promote the four modernizations and to help construct the native place.

⁵⁸ *Xianggang Fujian Tongxianghui jinxi jinian tekan 1939–1989*, p. 1.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 75–7.

⁶⁰ Interview with Mr Shi Ziqing, 9/10/90; *Longyan Lü Gang Tongxianghui chengli wu zhounian jinian tekan* ('Special Issue for the 5th anniversary of the founding of Long Yan Fellow Villages Association staying in Hong Kong') (1989), *passim*.

Unprecedented also were the economic opportunities on the Mainland and the resources of Hong Kong businessmen in the 1980s, both of which have far exceeded those of the pre-1949 period. This enabled many tongxianghui to help promote trade and investments of various kinds in the home regions, as mentioned. It is perhaps reasonable to surmise that at least one of the motives for leaders of existing tongxianghui to renew contacts with the guxiang, and for others to form new associations, was to gain privileged access to all levels of Mainland authorities and business advantages, which might not be confined geographically to the native region. Even their donations, to the cynic, may be a means of currying favour with the authorities and 'going through the backdoor'. As one of their critics observed, many of the new tongxianghui leaders, using the tongxianghui connection as a tool to establish relations, are economic 'opportunists'. Certainly this is one way of enhancing their status in status-conscious China. However, this is not to deny that there is a strong and genuine attachment to the native place.

During this period, some of Hong Kong's regional associations, which had always played a pivotal role in the world network of regional associations, formalized this role in various ways. Hong Kong's Chaozhou groups had been very active in forming the worldwide Teochow International Convention in 1981, and the Chaozhou Shanghui publishes the *TIC Bulletin*, which issued Number 15 in 1992. The Jinjiang Tongxianghui also founded The Union of Jinjiang Societies in Asia in 1990 with members in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Macao, the Philippines, Taiwan, and the Mainland, to promote friendly, economic and cultural ties.⁶¹

Review

Hong Kong is a modern city where many factors act to dilute regional feelings. The historical conditions between 1949 and 1977 were particularly challenging. It is therefore not surprising that a number of regional associations have become defunct or inactive. What is surprising is that so many have survived and flourished, and so many new ones have emerged. This certainly testifies to the deep-seated and dynamic nature of regional sentiments but at the same

⁶¹ Of course the changing Hong Kong-China political relations due to 1997 have also affected the attitude of *tongxianghui*, but this will not be elaborated here.

time, one can say that the 'bonding' role of regional associations has helped to sustain native place consciousness, especially by adapting their functions to changing circumstances.

As we have seen, regional associations' work over the years has changed with changing historical circumstances. Not only do they have to cope with different economic, social and political changes, they also have to keep pace with the changing emotional needs of their members. While they help to express the migrant's love and concern for the guxiang, they must also constantly reconfirm his native place identity and reinforce his loyalty. In other words, they do, and must continue to make the guxiang relevant.

The motto of the Jinjiang Tongxianghui, founded in 1985, 'Plant roots in Hong Kong; tie the heart to the home region' (Zhi gen Xianggang, xin xi guxiang), demonstrates the creative way regional associations respond to changing historical conditions. Certainly it cannot be denied that in the last two decades the Hong Kong identity has evolved rapidly while regional identity has become vague, especially among those born here after 1949. The motto shows that tongxianghui leaders are definitely not attempting to resist the former, but instead, are trying to inculcate in their young people a sense of native place consciousness to co-exist with the Hong Kong identity. The motto is designed to reconcile two loyalties, two divergent sentiments rather than dichotomize them—reminiscent of the principle of 'One country, two systems'—as a means of resolving contradictions. So long as the native place is relevant, whether on the emotional or material level, and has a special place in people's hearts, regional associations are likely to remain a useful bridge between the native place and its native sons.